

Denice Leslie
December 9, 2007
Advent 2 Year A
Isaiah 11: 1 - 10
Romans 15:4 – 13
Matthew 3: 1 – 12

An Advent Journey: The Ghost of Christmas Past:

“Old Marley did his best to prepare Master Scrooge for our visitations! But, alas he still did not quite believe. “When Scrooge awoke (again) it was so dark, that, looking out of bed he could scarcely distinguish the transparent window from the opaque walls of his chamber.

He was endeavoring to pierce the darkness with his ferret eyes, when the chimes of a neighboring church struck the four quarters. So he listened for the hour.

“Ding, dong!”

“A quarter past,” said Scrooge, counting.

“Ding, dong!”

“Half past,” said Scrooge

“Ding, dong!” A quarter to it,” said Scrooge.

“Ding, dong!” “The hour itself,” said Scrooge triumphantly, “and nothing else!”

He spoke before the hour bell sounded, which it now did with a deep, dull, hollow, melancholy One.

Then it was my **light flashed** upon his room, and I reached out my hand, and drew the curtains of his bed aside.... not at his feet, nor at his back, but those to which his face was addressed.....and Scrooge...found himself face to face with my unearthly self, his second visitor, the **Ghost of Christmas Past!**

I am a strange figure, I grant you—child like, yet not so like a child as like an old man...in a tunic of purest white, with a lustrous belt round my waist, and a branch of fresh green holly wrapped round my head from which sprang

bright clear jets of light---while in my hand I carried a great extinguisher—as for a huge candle—my cap. He spoke to me:

“Are you the Spirit, sir, whose coming was foretold me?”

“I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.

“Long past?” asked Scrooge

“No, YOUR past.” Said I

Scrooge pondered this in silence, and then feeling a special desire to see me in my cap begged me to be covered!

“What!” I remonstrated, “Would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give?”

Well, Scrooge reverently disclaimed all intention to offend.... He then made bold to enquire what business brought me here.

“Your welfare!” I said sternly.

Scrooge expressed himself much obliged, but could not help thinking that a night of unbroken rest would have been more conducive to that end.

“Your RECLAMATION, then—take heed Scrooge!” I warned, putting out my strong hand as I spoke, and clasped him gently by the arm. “Rise, and walk with me.”¹

And so it was that at the stroke of One, the Ghost of Christmas Past appears to Scrooge, ...announcing its purpose is for Scrooge’s *reclamation!*

And hopefully this Advent season for our reclamation as well. Reclamation involves repentance.

John the Baptist is our Ghost of Christmas Past in Matthew’s gospel this morning. He says, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come

¹ My Advent preaching this year is taken from Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, using a four week bible study on the story for inspiration by Travis J. School, Creative Communications for the Parish.

near.” John calls us to prepare, to prepare the way for the Lord’s coming, calling the people of his day to confess their sinfulness and wash it away in baptism.

Rabbinic Judaism understands that the repentance of sin requires five elements: recognition of one’s sins as sin, remorse, desisting from sin, restitution where possible, and confession.

Old Scrooge, like most of us, doesn’t see that he has anything to repent of. That is why he is being haunted by three Christmas Spirits.

First he must acknowledge by the use of his reason that he has changed over time and not for the better. And on recognizing this fact, then he must experience the adverse effect that change has had not only on himself but others.

He has to see and feel his pain and their pain if he is truly to feel any sense of remorse, for remorse IS a feeling—a sincere feeling of regret and sorrow for one’s offenses which—in order to be true repentance-- leads to a natural desire to desist from such behavior in the future and make amends for it.

But desisting from his old behavior is as of today, still a far country from where Scrooge is with this Spirit’s visit. It remains for the visitation of the Spirit of Christmas Present and the final visitation of the Spirit of Christmas Yet to come to lead Scrooge to any life changing transformation.

Today we witness only his awakening to the need for repentance and his first feelings of remorse and regret as a result of this Spirit’s itinerary. His past witnesses with ample example.

The Spirit takes Scrooge “on a journey into his past, beginning with his childhood in boarding school where we see a very lonely and miserable young boy, alienated from his father by his father’s choice; left behind at the Christmas holidays in a drafty and deteriorating old school.

Finally, as the years pass, one Christmas in late adolescence he is rescued by his loving sister, Fan, who has prevailed upon their father

to permit Ebenezer to return home. “Home, little Fan?” says the young Scrooge.

“Yes!” said the child, brimful of glee, “Home for good and all. Home for ever and ever!” We can feel some sympathy for Scrooge, knowing this can’t we? And so to we can have sympathy for ourselves when we revisiting those childhood experiences over which we have little control but which shaped us for good or ill. But we cannot stop here.

From there the Spirit takes Scrooge to the sight of his first apprenticeship with a man whom he dearly came to love, Master Fezziwig who in this memory, throws a Christmas Eve party for his employees, hiring a fiddler and dancing up a storm.

Playing the devils advocate, the Ghost chide Scrooge about how little Master Fezziwig spent on this celebration that his employees should all hold him in such high esteem. Heated by the remark, we hear Scrooge’s former and as yet unspoiled self defend his Master as one who “...has the power to render us (clerks) happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil.”

Adding, “And that happiness is as great as if it cost a fortune.” And as soon Scrooge says this, he comes to his older self once more as his words and actions return to haunt him as he recalls his own clerk, Bob Cratchit to whom he was so nasty not just a few hours of daylight ago that very Christmas Eve, threatening to fire the man if he so much as lit one chunk of coal to warm his frigid hands. Here we see as Scrooge sees, a young man who did know joy and affection, consideration and compassion. What happened? The light emanating from the Spirits head has revealed a new truth to him. He doesn’t have long to ponder it when

The Ghost of Christmas past leads him on to another Christmas where he is now a man in the prime of life, but not so innocent and not so young, and no longer fully present to those around him who are his friends and who care for him--- as the penury of his past has

unconsciously shaped him into a man whose sole focus in life is the pursuit of wealth. Why is that the insecurities of life have a way of outweighing the good in the choices we make?

In this visit to Scrooge's past we hear his one true love, Bell, fail in her attempt to make him conscious of how his love for money has robbed her of him.

Bell says, "Another idol has displaced me; and, if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come as I would have tried to do, I have no just cause to grieve.....(pause)...I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master passion, Gain, engrosses you...If you were free today...can even I believe you would choose a dowerless girl...do I not know that your repentance and regret (of having betrayed your) one guiding principle of Gain would surely follow? ...I release you, Ebenezer. May you be happy in the life you have chosen."

Scrooge blusters but does not protest at any convincing level and lets her go.

The old Scrooge looking on his past is tortured with regret and says as much, "'Spirit! Show me no more! Why do you delight in torturing me!" But the Spirit's strength forces him forward to one more Christmas where he sees Bell happily settled with children of her own and a husband who loves her dearly. Realizing very keenly all that he has lost, Scrooge cries out, "Leave me! Take me back! Haunt me no longer!"

In a desperate bid to return to denial Scrooge grabs the Spirit's cap from and shoves it over the ghost, struggling to extinguish the light—which refuses to leave his room, until, exhausted, Scrooge succumbs once more to an irresistible drowsiness and falls into a deep sleep.

How are we like Scrooge in our failure to recognize that we are truly sinners? We "are so quick to say 'God loves and forgives me' that we never actually do more than say a few 'I'm sorrys' as we read a general confession now and again.

Whatever happened to sin? (Karl

Menniger asked.) Do you think God loves you so much that he really doesn't hate your sin? Do you think God is so dimwittedly lovesick for you that he doesn't notice that you don't love him enough to even ask him to help you amend your life?

"Bear fruits that befit repentance." cries the Baptist: Demonstrate that someone other than you is the center of the universe. Stop saying that God forgives you even when you aren't sorry and you have no intention of asking God to amend your life.

If all that being a child of God is about is getting some water thrown on us in God's name, then why aren't the stone jetties at the beach all children of God?"

The heavenly No, spoken by John the Baptist, is God's continuing Word that remains valid. The purpose of that NO is to show us that we are indeed sinners. The purpose of that NO is to show us that we need² reclamation--- or make that word redemption.

God is about redeeming us—regenerating us—recreating us. But it takes our cooperation.

Let us use this period of Advent to prepare by revisiting our pasts and looking at the ways in which the experiences of our lives have perhaps unconsciously shaped us. But let us not stop there. Because there is no excuse to be found in "the devil made me do it"—we must get beyond sympathy for ourselves as much as we deserve it. Because if we wallow in self-pity there is no final release—no reclamation—no making new. The purpose of revisiting the past is to redeem it and us *in the present*.

It might take more work than a mere revisiting. If you feel that the patterns by which you are currently living life are not working—if you find yourself stuck—frustrated and a tad miserable--come in and talk to me. Because if

² The Rev. Dr. Samuel Zumwalt
St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Wilmington, North Carolina USA

the definition of crazy is doing the same things over and over again and getting the same results its time for a change!

--Especially if the only answer you have for yourself is to react with, "It can't be me—its all those people out there—its THEIR problem," I invite you to remove the extinguisher cap on the light of God's Spirit and take the risk of new life possible in the redeeming, life reclaiming grace of God. Because this is God's will for us in Jesus Christ.

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear."